

# Should CHIP cover birth control?

By KAHIRIN DEINES - Associated Press - 01/29/09

A Democratic lawmaker says a state insurance program for children should provide birth control to teenagers.

The Children's Health Insurance Program, or CHIP, currently provides insurance to about 1,770 females between the ages of 15 and 19.

Democratic state Rep. Chuck Hunter of Helena told a House committee Wednesday it is likely that many of these young women are sexually active and could become pregnant. He is sponsoring a bill that would make it legal for the program to pay for contraceptives for the teenagers.

"I looked at the data that exists and the data that exists says that a number of teens, a high percentage of teens, are sexually active," Hunter said. "I don't think what we do here is going to change that."

What it could change, he said, are the financial and social costs of teenage pregnancy.

Hunter, a former CHIP director, estimates that such pregnancies in 2007 cost the program about \$330,000 in related health care costs.

The CHIP program, which receives funding from both the state and federal governments, currently covers prenatal and postnatal care. Hunter's bill would eliminate a provision that prevents the program from paying for birth control.

Representatives of Planned Parenthood, the American Civil Liberties Union and Pro-Choice Montana support the measure. They say teenage pregnancy is on the rise, and extending contraceptives to teenagers enrolled in CHIP could stem increases.

But opponents argue that paying for contraception would promote immorality.

"We have a financial and social problem solved by encouraging promiscuity," said Ken Champion, a resident of Gallatin County.

Montanans recently voted to expand CHIP coverage, which currently extends to nearly 17,000 children in families with incomes up to 175 percent of the federal poverty level. The expansion would cap the income limit at 250 percent of the poverty level.

The bill is House Bill 281.